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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades there has been a move in philosophy of education toward a concept of pragmatic rationality. This paper examines whether the move away from systematicity, fixed guiding principles or logical systems, makes this notion of pragmatic rationality so broad that it can encompass any procedure of selection which involves rules, no matter how private, flexible, or tacit these rules may be. It further examines how the existentialist emphasis on the value of passive and nonintentioned lived-reality can be related to the move to charactetize teaching as the encouragement of genuine engagement of the individual's rational judgment on underlying issues. The notion of rational practicality for both the rationalist and existentialist consists of an interaction, a dialectic between experience and systematicity, in which the priority of either will depend on the nature of the decision to be made. The very vagueness of the definition emphasizes that the pursuit of knowledge is determined at every stage by unspecifiable powers of thought which are subject to certain limitations and boundary conditions but which are still open to judgement on the basis of immediate sensory experience, structured disciplines, past knowledge, guiding principles, and communal agreements. (Author/DE)

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PRAGMATIC RATIONALITY IN EDUCATION

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PRAGMATIC RATIONALITY IN EDUCATION

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The last few decades have marked a move in philosophy of education towards what appears to be a new concept of rationality, a move made explicit in Scheffler's claim[1] that "certainly, rationality is a fundamental cognitive and moral virtue and as such should, I believe, form a basic objective of teaching" and illustrated by Green's definition of teaching as an activity aimed at transmitting what is reasonable to believe by guiding students to assess what is reasonable for them to believe.[2] A similar move is apparent in philosophy of science where abandoning the notion of truth (whether of logic or of observed facts) as fixed and absolute has focused the attention of philosophers such as Toulmin on reasoning. Rationality under these terms seems to be equated with reasonableness rather than logic or systematicity, and to distinguish it from a strictly deductive form of reason, I have tentatively termed it pragmatic rationality or reasonableness.

The purpose of this paper is to see whether the move away from systematicity, fixed guiding principles or logical systems makes the notion of rationality so broad that it can encompass <u>any</u> procedure of selection which involves rules, no matter how private, flexible or tacit these rules may be. Moreover, can the existentialist emphasis on the value of passive and nonintentional lived-reality be related in any way to the move to characterize teaching as the encouragement of genuine engagement of the individual's rational judgment on underlying issues?

Toulmin's claim for rationality[3] says that within a science whose disciplinary goals are sufficiently agreed, or within a community whose standards are sufficiently coherent, men demonstrate their rationality not by ordering their concepts and beliefs in tidy formal structures, but by their preparedness to respond to novel

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situations with open minds--acknowledging the shortcomings of their former procedures and moving beyond them. For Toulmin, rationality fails where factors such as dogmatism, conservatism or prejudice, lack of professional cohesion or breakdowns in communication, political pressure or sheer inattention may frustrate the normal procedures of intellectual selection. The boundaries of rationality are similar in many respects to Green's exclusion of some forms of conditioning and indoctrination from teaching activities on the grounds that they do not involve the giving of reasons, evidence, argument or justifications necessary for teaching to have taken place.

Toulmin in his first volume of Human Understanding is concerned with conceptual aggregates, systems or populations that are employed on a collective basis by a community, and his comments are not directly relevant to educational systems. Yet his key notions of "adaptation" and "demand" rather than "form," "coherence" and "validity" link closely with epistemological assumptions about learning, and his search for as objective a justification as possible for demanding conceptual change is a challenge most educators face daily. While in routine decisions of science, the rules for intellectual strategies and standards of judgment are agreed upon and relatively systematic, Toulmin says that even in cloudy or borderline cases where the codified rubrics of an established theory cannot be appealed to, rational procedures still exist, for such disagreements are resolved by broader arguments involving the comparison of alternative intellectual strategies, in the light of historical experience and precedence. That this is vague need not concern us at this stage, for the proceedings of any conceptual change or decision provide a range of different occasions for rational choice and judgment which are not simply matters of personal taste. Nor are such choices arbitrary products of human idiosyncracies uncontrolled by external requirements or constraints. The mistake Toulmin wishes to warn us against making is that of supposing that there is one and only one way of making choices in a soundly objective and fruitful way. The final

arbiter of whether a change in one's conceptual framework is sound or not is whether it contributes to the solution of that discipline's outstanding problems or not, and judgments are assessed in terms of both current explanatory powers and ideals.

Let us look a little more closely at some educational implications of this pragmatic rationality. Scheffler is perhaps one of the most persistent proponents for the necessity of reason in teaching. In his recent collection of essays Reason and Teaching he considers three philosophical models of teaching--the impression model, the insight model, and the rule model.[4/] In the first, the desired result of teaching is an organised accumulation in the learner of basic elements fed in from without, organised and processed in standard ways but not generated by the learner himself. It rests on the assumption that there is a fixed and correct body of knowledge to be accepted, without question, and that the teacher's role is simply to control input of data. Sufficient for knowledge, but not for wisdom, understanding or discovery, it represents the didactic aspect of education.

Scheffler's main criticism of this model is that it fails to make adequate room for choice or decision on the part of the learner, and thus for insight, understanding, new applications of theories, new theories, radical innovation. To remedy this defect, he introduces the insight model, which insists that knowledge is a matter of vision, vision which cannot be dissected into elementary sensory or verbal units that can be conveyed from one person to another. Where the impression model stresses atomic manipulable bits at the expense of understanding, the insight model stresses primarily the acquisition of a personal vision of reality.

Yet for Scheffler, the insight model is inadequate in that it too offers too passive a notion of insight or vision as a condition of knowledge, for for Scheffler, knowledge must involve deliberation, argument, judgment, appraisal of reasons, pro and con, weighing of evidence, appeal to principles and decision-making which seem prima facie akin to the Toulminian idea of rationality. Moreover in stressing individual cognitive insights, the insight model fails to cover not only the concept

of character Scheffler sees as crucial to education, with its related notions of attitude and disposition, but the fundamental commitment to agreed principles by which insights are to be assessed and criticised.

To encapsulate this more public aspect of education and retain the individual's freedom to choose, Scheffler presents a rather Kantian rule model. Now the knower must satisfy a further condition beyond the mere storing and reception of a bit of information. The condition goes beyond the vision of an underlying reality--"It generally involves the capacity for a principled assessment of reasons bearing on justification of the belief in question."

Now what is generally expected of the learner is that his autonomy be evidenced in his ability to construct and evaluate fresh and alternative arguments, the power to innovate rather than just the capacity to reproduce stale arguments earlier stored. Scheffler says that he does not intend rationality to suggest a faculty of reason, nor to oppose rationality to experience or to the emotions. Nor is rationality being construed as the process of making logical deductions. What is at point here is simply the autonomy of the student's judgment, his right to seek reasons in support of claims upon his credibilities and loyalties, and his correlative obligations to deal with such reasons in a principled manner. The appeal to principles purporting to be impartial and universal suggests a move closer to Collingwoodian or Kantian guiding principles than perhaps Toulmin would have approved of. Yet Scheffler remains consistent with Toulmin's thought when he stresses that rationality cannot be taken simply as an abstract and general ideal. It is embodied in multiple evolving traditions in which the basic condition holds that issues are resolved by reference to reasons. Scheffler states that while these principles are consistent, impartial and generalizable, they are in no way absolute, innate or immutable--"they are what we ourselves acknowledge, they are the best we know, and we are prepared to improve them should the need and occasion arise."[5/] In a later essay, claiming that the fundamental trait to be encouraged in schools is reasonableness, he gives what seems

to be a broader definition of rationality, though he is relating it to a concept of democratic education and a moral point of view. He says[6]

> In training our students to question, we train them to be critical. We encourage them to ask questions, to look for evidence, to seek and scrutinize alternatives, to be critical of their own ideas as well as those of others. This educational course precludes taking school as an instrument for shaping their minds to a preconceived idea. For if they seek reasons, it is their evaluation of such reasons that will determine what ideas they eventually accept.

But the problem as to whether pragmatic rationality unites the insight and impression model, as Scheffler claims it does, or is simply a focus on the need for autonomous choice, is still open to question. Scheffler says[7] that there is no intent to oppose reason to experience or to the emotions. And in discussing his insight model he suggests that vision defines and organises particular experiences and points up their significance. If we have conceded that the operative principles of rational judgment at any given time are much more detailed, flexible and specific, much more closely tied to immediate intention and context than a requirement of formal consistency and public convention would indicate, how far can one move away from systematicity and still be rational?

The existentialist philosopher of education, David Denton, denies that insight or personal knowing can be meaningfully or directly related to any systematized form of reasoning and attacks Scheffler's notion that teaching should be an initiation into the rational life, a life in which the critical quest for reasons is a dominant and integrating motive.[8]

Denton argues for the inclusion in the classroom of the protean, the simultaneous subsidiary aspects of human experience which he sees as irreducible to any rigid system of thought. It is difficult to see how one can avoid the presence of such

aspects, but it is true that the teacher does little to encourage total bodily-sensory experience for its cognitive value. Denton seeks awareness which is unstructured, does not follow rules, is a totality of sympathetic experiencing and feeling. What relevance could this have either to teaching or rationality? He offers [9] an example of a classroom situation, where in an attempt to teach Camus' isolation/involvement paradigm, he had students and professor crawl separately through a complex tunnel, bombarded by sense experiences of sound, wet leaves, pieces of fur, lights. Finally a large sheet was placed over everybody and they "were massaged into one organism by sounds, smells, lights, touches and (their) own collective body-heat and breathing." Does this constitute teaching? It is the presentation of a holistic experience, to be sure, but it has already been structured by the teacher. Is personal experience of the isolation/involvement paradigm in a structured situation sufficient "reason" for accepting or rejecting it? Denton feels that after the ensuing class discussion, where words came painfully, most students had come to an awareness of the paradigm. Did the educational value of the experience lie in the fact that, given a sense of direction from the teacher, the students were forced to seek appropriate language-forms to describe their experiences and to relate their own experience to Camus' verbally-oriented paradigm? Having to choose words from their individual language systems to communicate their experience to other students is in a sense a scrutinizing and selecting of alternatives according to publicly-accepted rules, which was one of the defining features of pragmatic rationality. Before discussion, the experience was just a given, though it was structured, which could not be used or manipulated.

Here knowledge arose from personal experience only when the "system" of language, flexible as it is, was appealed to to find words appropriate for the purpose of the lesson. In so doing it organised and objectified the personal experience. I am tempted to say that without this reflective action, insight could not have taken place, and presentation of the experience was not enough. Denton was forced to

make the move from ordinary experience, the bodily-sensations, to rational activity, if the lesson was to have the slightest relevance to educators concerned with schooling.

When one acquires wisdom, rather than knowledge, in the classroom, what one acquires is not just a technique. One learns to make correct judgments. There are rules for making such judgments, but they do not form a system and only experienced people can apply them right, as Wittgenstein says, "Unlike calculating rules."[10/] Experience, that is, varied observation, can inform us of the consequences of being able to make someone else share our judgments about humans and they are incapable of general formulation; only in scattered cases can one arrive at a correct and fruitful judgment, establish a fruitful connection. And the most general remarks yield at best what looks like the fragments of a system. Dare we call these heuristics and tips for arriving at correct solutions in varied cases rules? Or reasons? But experience can make it easier for us to formulate such flexible rules, even if such rules are right on the borderlines of rationality.

Denton would probably not want to call the class discussion a <u>rational</u> activity. His educational concern is to place emphasis on "ordinary experience expressing itself with reason"[11/] than appeal to coherent systems of principles. He sees reason as possessing "tool value, meaning that it is useful for developing notions about the world, but is not useful for setting forth either large conceptual schemes or comprehensible methods for explaining all of experience."

To admit reason as having tool value for helping us to make sense of the world of experience, a tool which claims neither totality nor truth and operates within tightly drawn limits is to make a large concession for an existentialist, that is, to the rational intentions of Scheffler and Toulmin. Doubtless Scheffler would feel most uneasy about such an extreme move away from consistent and coherent systems as Denton makes, for he says

> "Rationality involves deliberation and judgments and hence presupposes general and impartial principles governing the assessment of reasons bearing on the issues. Without such guiding principles, the very conception of rational deliberation collapses and the concept of rational conduct loses its meaning."[12/]

Yet the move urged by Scheffler away from systematicity presupposed a move away from criteria of consistency or inconsistency, away from correctness and incorrectness, validity and invalidity, towards notions of relevance, appropriateness, adaptability where the rules need not depend overtly on basic systematic principles. How far dare one go before the notion of rationality loses its force? Is Scheffler's rule model too bound by consistent systematic rules to be pragmatically rational? And is Denton's too flexible before unique contexts and experiences? Each share the notion that pragmatic rationality is an interaction, a dialectic between experience and systematicity, in which the priority of either will depend of the nature of the decision to be made.

Yet to say this is to say nothing startlingly novel. It is strongly reminiscent of Dewey's notion of reflective thinking, thinking which he saw as neither a case of spontaneous combustion nor simply an invocation of general principles. There is usually something specific which occasions and evokes it, and the formation of some new tentative hypothesis will evolve on the basis of both past experience and prior knowledge. If the suggestion that occurs is at once accepted, then we have non-reasonable thought, or what Dewey called uncritical thinking.

To turn the thing over in one's mind, to reflect, in Dewey's terms, or to be pragmatically rational, in the terms of this paper, means to seek additional evidence for new data, for guiding principles, for anything that will help to decide more coolly whether new concepts are acceptable or absurd. Pragmatic rationality, for all its vagueness, seems to be little more than the ability to maintain a state of doubt while one carries on protracted and relevant inquiry, what counts as relevant being

determined by the nature of the problem. So Dewey suggests empirical and theoretical justifications for scientific problems. Toulmin favours sociological inquiry for conceptual change. Scheffler, concerned with curricula and method in schools, seeks consistent guiding principles. Denton, seeking the understanding of holistic experiences, contraposes phenomenalistic experience with language. To use a distinction Martin Schiralli is currently working on, each adopts different conceptions of the same concept, and my examples from Scheffler and Denton bring into focus several features of pragmatic rationality which were obscured if one searched only for high-level generalities. To say that these philosophers do not agree in emphasis need not imply that they are disagreeing basically. Scheffler and Denton are each concerned that the student reach decisions about data by placing such data against some selective framework which, flexible though it may be, leaves no room for anarchic irresponsibility or passivity. The rational guidelines are continually open to revision, and vary according to the type of decision to be made, but they are omnipresent in education.

Even if we admit the necessity of pragmatic rationality in education, it must be admitted that the notion remains excruciatingly vague and open-textured, so vague as to be almost circular and of little value in philosophical argument. The crucial issue of deciding in what scales our own concepts and judgments are themselves to be weighed seems to have been resolved by applying a broad covering term--pragmatic rationality--to multivarious judgments, criticisms, appraisals, justifications without which, it seems, man is unable to choose to act. And in so doing, it still manages to avoid the really basic issue--on what grounds we choose which reasons to choose. How flexible are the rules? How system-bound need they be? Need they be consciously applied, or is it sufficient for one to be able to describe actions or choice in terms of a rule? We may finally be led to agree with Kant that no system of rules can prescribe the procedure by which the rules themselves are to be applied. For even if Kant had in mind a less flexible set of rules than, say, Denton, he is

forced to admit that there is an ultimate agency which, unfettered by any explicit rules, decides on the subsumption of a particular instance under any general rule or concept. And of this agency, Kant says only that it, is "what constitutes our so-called mother-wit."[13/] Indeed at another point he declares that this faculty, indispensable to the exercise of any judgment, is quite inscrutable, like Wittgenstein's form of life, or Toulmin's Weltanschauung. The capacity to decide on relevant or reasonable criteria for reaching decisions in unique cases, as well as the capacity to decide which are the overriding principles is often, though rule-governed, tacit. About that whereof we cannot speak, let us remain silent. There needs to be much more work done along the lines of Green's conceptual analysis of the related concepts of judging, reasoning, justifying, explaining. There needs to be more work done regarding the link between intuitive, tacit or sensory "knowing" and rational thought, between implicit boundary conditions and explicit rules.

Yet the value of the insistence on pragmatic rationality in education reflects a move away from the emphasis on rigid knowledge systems to the more open-textured areas of belief, understanding and judgment, a move which, in placing more emphasis on the receptive capacities of the individual student, seems to be heading in a more realistic direction. Moreover, the very vagueness of the notion of pragmatic rationality, emphasises that the pursuit of knowledge is determined at every stage by unspecifiable powers of thought which are nonetheless subject to certain limitations, boundary conditions, and that the recognition of a reasoning intelligence must include a recognition of its capacity to choose practically on the basis of immediate sensory experience, structured disciplines, past knowledge, guiding principles and communal agreements.[14/]

Footnotes

1/ Israel Scheffler, Reason and Teaching. (Bobbs-Merrill Co. Inc., New York, 1973), p. 78.

2/ Thomas F. Green, The Activities of Teaching. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1971), p. 102.

3/ Stephen Toulmin, Human Understanding. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1972), vol. 1.

4/ Scheffler, op. cit. p. 78.

5/ Ibid., p. 80.

6/ Ibid., pp. 142,3.

7/ Ibid. p. 78.

8/ David Denton, The Language of Ordinary Experience. (New York: Philosophers Library Inc., 1970), p. 107.

9/ Ibid. p. 83.

10/ Wittgenstein, Ludvig, Philosophical Investigations. (New York, Macmillan and Co., 1958) pp. 227, 228.

11/ Denton, Language of Ordinary Experience. p. 145.

12/ Ibid. p. 145.

13/ Immanuel Kant, Critique of Pure Reason. A133.

14/ Comments from Bruce Haynes, Hugh G. Petrie, Don Tunnell and several others have helped me to eliminate several vague and/or irrelevant points from this paper and I wish to express thanks for their helpful advice.

CK: dc